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Reconciliation through Estrangement

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I am interested in a political art, that is to say, an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings. An art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay.

To say that one needs art, or politics, that incorporate ambiguity and contradiction is not to say that one then stops recognizing and condemning things as evil. However, it might stop one being so utterly convinced of the certainty of one's own solutions.

William Kentridge¹

¹ The first quote is cited in: Michael Godby, "William Kentridge: Retrospective," *Art Journal* 58, no. 3 (1999): 83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1999.10791955>. The second quote is from: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and William Kentridge, "Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in Conversation with William Kentridge (1999)," in *William Kentridge*, ed. Rosalind Krauss, October Files 21 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 21.

Setting the Stage²

Picture this: on a theatre stage, a three-headed dog called Brutus nervously awaits his sentence in a criminal trial. The verdict, spoken in a stern voice from high above, establishes an “unequal culpability” for each head. The first head is that of a politician, who the judge asserts cannot be held responsible for how his grand vision of society has been practically realized – he is acquitted and released from detention to enjoy a happy retirement. The second head is that of a military general, who has, according to the judge, not been engaged in any wrongdoing himself, but an “example has to be made” – as punishment, he is condemned to take over the leadership of the state’s newly formed army. Finally, the third head belongs to a low-ranking foot-soldier of the regime. Now the judge enumerates the heinous crimes committed by this torturer, and convicts him to 212 years in prison. The episode ends with the three heads viciously biting each other, culminating in one terrifying howl: “Amnesty!”³

² This paper results from conversations with four colleagues who have been exceptionally generous with their advice and feedback: Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, Bronwyn Leebaw, Andrew Schaap and Olga Taxidou kindly provided me with written comments that greatly expanded my initial views on this topic. Sincere thanks are also due to Maria-Alina Asavei, Lawrie Balfour, Thomas Brudholm, Jaco Barnard-Naude, Toby Kelly, Mihaela Mihai and Deborah Silverman for sharing their thoughts on this paper. I presented earlier versions during workshops in Prato (Italy), Oslo (Norway) and Stellenbosch (South Africa, via video-link). The audiences at these events helped me to refine and improve my arguments. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the Editor of the *Review of Politics*, Catherine Zuckert, for expertly guiding the paper through the refereeing process, and to five anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and observations. The remaining errors are mine, of course.

³ Jane Taylor, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1998), 63.

How can we make sense of such an intriguing scene? And why should political theorists devote attention to a theatrical performance like this? This short episode stems from the South African play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, first performed in May 1997, while the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was still operational. The three-headed dog Brutus is impersonated by an impressively mobile puppet with a suitcase as belly, containing plenty of evidence to incriminate its owner, the eponymous Ubu, played by a human actor, and the story's central figure. Unusually, the puppet handlers are fully visible to the audience and sometimes even serve as actors themselves. The judge's voice is that of William Kentridge, the director, whose face looms menacingly on a screen behind the stage. And it can surely be no coincidence that the foot-soldier's sentence, which triggers the call for an amnesty, is exactly the same as the one handed out to Eugene de Kock (aka "Prime Evil"), one of the Apartheid regime's most notorious killers.⁴

As this vignette hopefully evokes, watching *Ubu and the Truth Commission* is at the same time stimulating and frustrating, mystifying and thought-provoking, anxiety-inducing and outrageous.⁵ The main reason for the spectator's disconcerting experience is that the play narrates the horrors of Apartheid with the support of a multitude of estrangement devices, from life-sized puppetry, to operatic songs, animated films

⁴ Shane Graham, *South African Literature after the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 46.

⁵ For a video of the play, which I have consulted in my interpretation, see: Handspring Puppet Company, *Ubu and the Truth Commission (Full Feature)*, accessed January 24, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVgT_x53z14.

and verbatim victim accounts. Clearly, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* stages transitional justice in a way that is completely different from the heavily orchestrated proceedings of the TRC. Whereas the TRC was driven by the determination to heal a broken community, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* profoundly reconfigures the representations of perpetrators, bystanders and victims of violence. In the theatre, the very process of overcoming Apartheid, and its underlying ideal of reconciliation, is publicly examined and put on trial.

It is one of this essay's key contentions that cultural re-enactments, such as the various plays created in reaction to the TRC, promote a "form of democratic political education, not merely a salve for old wounds"⁶. This pedagogical role can be fulfilled by diverse art forms, from film and theatre to poetry and sculpture, but they all aspire to shed new light on the conclusions reached during the transition period.⁷

Ubu and the Truth Commission is emblematic of such cultural re-enactments, which is why political theorists should take the play seriously. It has the capacity to assist us in drawing out the contours of an alternative type of reconciliation that accepts the continued existence of deep differences in post-conflict settings, yet demands a productive re-articulation of identities in transitional moments. By unpacking the complex functions that a particular kind of estrangement (estrangement *for*, rather than

⁶ Stephen L. Esquith, "Re-Enacting Mass Violence," *Polity* 35, no. 4 (2003): 513, <https://doi.org/10.1086/POLv35n4ms3235451>.

⁷ For example, cultural re-enactments can problematize the responsibility of bystanders in a manner that is wholly alien to the victim-perpetrator model underwriting legal procedures. See: Stephen L. Esquith, *The Political Responsibilities of Everyday Bystanders* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 149–82.

from, the world) may perform in processes of transition, I thus lend credence to an understanding of reconciliation that contrasts with the TRC's restorative conception: what Andrew Schaap calls "agonistic reconciliation"⁸.

In the broadest sense, the paper seeks to contribute to a better appreciation of the shifting interface between aesthetics and politics. Building on earlier debates within the tradition of Critical Theory around the place of culture in modern societies⁹, this interface has over the past two decades been illuminated from a great variety of angles, concentrating, for example, on the role of cinematic and novelistic storytelling in coming to terms with evil and on the multiple knowledge practices pertaining to the study of global politics.¹⁰ Strangely, with a few notable exceptions¹¹, theatre – the essay's

⁸ Andrew Schaap, *Political Reconciliation*, Routledge Innovations in Political Theory 15 (London: Routledge, 2005). See also: Andrew Schaap, "Agonism in Divided Societies," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006): 255–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453706061095>.

⁹ Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London/New York: Verso, 2010); see also: Russell A. Berman, *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Christoph Henning, "Theories of Culture in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. Michael J. Thompson, Political Philosophy and Public Purpose (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 255–78.

¹⁰ Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Houndmills/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Garry L. Hagberg, ed., *Fictional Characters, Real Problems: The Search for Ethical Content in Literature* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); María Pía Lara, *Narrating Evil: A Postmetaphysical Theory of Reflective Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹¹ J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1990); Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, The Wellek Library Lectures

main focus – has remained at the relative margins of political theory’s horizon of problematizations. The paper hopes to widen this horizon through a dialogue across disciplines, whilst acknowledging that others have recently taken systematic steps in the same direction.¹²

The argument proceeds as follows: The next section outlines the agonistic view of reconciliation and explains why it is more cogent than the restorative one. I then continue by reconstructing the notion of estrangement within aesthetic theory, proposing a distinction between estrangement *for*, and estrangement *from* the world. The subsequent step leads me to apply this conceptual framework to the interpretation of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. In the conclusion, I flesh out some of the wider implications for theorizing political reconciliation.

Before resuming my discussion, a proviso on the paper’s goal is required: In this essay, I maintain, by way of an inductive argument grounded in a specific case study, that art works can have a tangible impact on real-world politics, through the employment of estrangement devices that enable world-disclosure. The plausibility of this idea will likely depend on how narrowly we construe “impact”.

(New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).

¹² Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki, eds., *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance & Radical Democracy* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Margot Morgan, *Politics and Theatre in Twentieth-Century Europe: Imagination and Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

To avoid a misunderstanding from the start, my argument does not hinge on the overdrawn assertion that art works on their own and in isolation from other societal instruments can make a significant difference in post-conflict settings. The stage play I shall analyze below responds to a specific constellation of power, namely the South African reconciliation process post-Apartheid. Within this empirical setting, it would be vacuous to claim that even the most powerful piece of theatre, such as *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, will have any lasting effect on society at large, unless deeper transformations of material and socio-economic structures of inequality and oppression are set into motion as well.

So, if art's impact is not to be mistaken for producing monocausal, unilinear change, how should we comprehend it? The background presupposition on which this article rests is inspired by Hannah Arendt's thought that "theatre is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art."¹³ In her theorizing, Arendt assigned theatre – or more precisely, Greek tragedy – this place of excellence because she was convinced that action itself was only possible when citizens appeared in the public sphere and thereby commenced inter-acting with each other as equals. In other words, on Arendt's view, "democratic politics is itself highly theatrical"¹⁴.

While the reverse conclusion (that theatre is intrinsically democratic) undoubtedly seems wrong, political art at its best enables citizens to expand their imaginative vistas

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 187.

¹⁴ Richard Halpern, "Theater and Democratic Thought: Arendt to Rancière," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 548, <https://doi.org/10.1086/659358>.

by “seeing the world from other points of view [...] in order to develop a capacity for independent judgment”¹⁵. The claim about theatre as a vehicle for world-disclosure is hence at the same time more limited and more ambitious than simply surveying a play’s directly observable impact (such as audience numbers, awards, translations, adaptations etc.)¹⁶: it foregrounds the elusive, yet genuine, potential of art works to alter how we envisage ourselves and others, as members of a political community.

From Restorative Justice to Agonistic World-Disclosure

The purpose of this section is to sketch a robust theory of political reconciliation that envisions agonistic relations as catalysts of “unsettlements” in the aftermath of violence. The starting point for this reflection is, by contrast, the widely-held assumption that reconciliation is best achieved in moments of closure where a moral community comes together once the wounds of the past have healed. Let us unpack its main features to weigh both its ostensible strengths and its structural weaknesses.¹⁷

¹⁵ J. Peter Euben, “Arendt’s Hellenism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Richard Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 159.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive study of the complex role of theatre audiences see: Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd ed (London/New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁷ A note on the very distinction between restorative and agonistic reconciliation: it is designed to be heuristic, rather than deductive. This means that I hope to cover a number of relevant family resemblances that most adherents to the restorative view share. However, this also implies that there is a zone of fuzzy intermediary positions, which incorporate features of the agonistic view as well. For an excellent example see: Ernesto Verdeja, *Unchopping a Tree: Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Political Violence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

Numerous political theorists have scrutinized restorative justice's basic tenets, which all revolve around the notion that true reconciliation needs to culminate in a re-constituted community, which has overcome the fierce divisions of the past.¹⁸ The process whereby reconciliation in a restorative key proceeds moves from the perpetrators' acknowledgement of past wrong-doing to the making of amends through reparations or apologies, finally terminating in the victims letting go of resentment and granting forgiveness. On this view, the formerly estranged parties to a conflict successfully forsake their alienation and recognize the unity of the community to which they all belong.

One of the reasons why the notion of reconciliation as restorative justice has held such sway on the public imagination is to do with its frequent invocation during one of the most notorious reconciliation processes of the past 30 years: the South African TRC.¹⁹

¹⁸ Christopher Bennett, *The Apology Ritual: A Philosophical Theory of Punishment* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Nicholas Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Barbara Arneil and Jason Tockman, "The Impossible Machine: A Genealogy of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Contemporary Political Theory* 14, no. 4 (November 1, 2015): e1-4, <https://doi.org/10.1057/cpt.2014.50>; David Dyzenhaus, "Debating South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *The University of Toronto Law Journal* 49, no. 3 (1999): 311-14; Bronwyn Leebaw, "Legitimation or Judgment? South Africa's Restorative Approach to Transitional Justice," *Polity* 36, no. 1 (October 2003): 23-51.

The TRC was heavily imbued with the Christian rhetoric of atonement and redemption.²⁰ Its chair, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, made recurrent reference to the need for national healing in the aftermath of the Apartheid period.²¹ Tutu's emphasis on social harmony, associated with *ubuntu's* supposition of fundamental human connectedness, further strengthened the TRC's commitment to restorative justice, both on the individual and the collective level.²² South Africa's transition process was thus governed by a "therapeutic moral order"²³, in which the traumas of the past were supposed to be confronted through cathartic truth-telling and through the release of anger and hatred. The wider ramifications of South Africa's restorative justice paradigm have then been traced in a variety of other political contexts.²⁴

²⁰ Megan Shore, *Religion and Conflict Resolution: Christianity and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2009).

²¹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abrams, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

²² Michael Battle, "A Theology of Community: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu," *Interpretation* 54, no. 2 (2000): 173–182.

²³ Claire Moon, "Healing Past Violence: Traumatic Assumptions and Therapeutic Interventions in War and Reconciliation," *Journal of Human Rights* 8, no. 1 (2009): 73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754830902717726>.

²⁴ Ruti Teitel associates the restorative model with a particular historical phase of transitional justice mechanisms, where criminal trials were replaced with truth commissions: Ruti G. Teitel, *Globalizing Transitional Justice: Contemporary Essays* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 56–57. See also: Mahmood Mamdani, "Beyond Nuremberg: The Historical Significance of the Post-Apartheid Transition in South Africa," *Politics & Society* 43, no. 1 (2015): 61–88.

Given the prevalence of this framework, one might ask what could be problematic, normatively as well as practically, about this image of reconciliation. Andrew Schaap, and several authors following his lead, has provided us with the most persuasive answer to that question. Schaap's chief observation involves that the restorative model misconstrues what is genuinely political about reconciliation in the aftermath of violence: the agonistic, or conflictual, dimension that is characteristic of all human interactions. On this account, the moral basis on which reconciliation *qua* restorative justice is founded appears problematic. The following passage summarizes Schaap's approach effectively:

Rather than seeking to restore a unity predicated on a common identity, political reconciliation would presuppose a plurality of potentially incommensurable perspectives, not only between the communities to which perpetrators and victims belong but among them. Rather than being sustained by the fraternal warmth of shared suffering, reconciliation might be realised through common enjoyment of the world. Instead of the benign indifference of toleration, political reconciliation would entail a willingness to engage others in a passionate and often agonistic discourse about the world we share in common.²⁵

Underpinning this conception of reconciliation is Hannah Arendt's idea that power is exercised "whenever people get together and act in concert"²⁶ with each other. This means that power both depends on, and is enabling of, a common world that is shared by those who collectively engage in politics. When Schaap speaks of the importance of constructing a "common world", he uses the term in precisely this Arendtian sense: insofar as politics crucially hinges on acting in concert with others, the commonality of the world is never simply given; it constantly needs to be invoked, negotiated,

²⁵ Schaap, *Political Reconciliation*, 4.

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, "On Violence," in *Crises of the Republic; Lying in Politics, Civil Disobedience on Violence, Thoughts on Politics, and Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 151.

shaped, challenged and disputed. In other words, the common world in which power thrives is itself the product of struggle and conflict, as much as it is the result of concerted attempts to collaborate and find shared ground. This agonistic dimension, Schaap maintains, needs to be embraced in post-conflict moments.

At the heart of this agonistic conception of political reconciliation thus lies a claim about the relationship between the actors who seek to reconcile and the social setting within which reconciliation is pursued. Schaap argues that political reconciliation is predicated on a leap of faith insofar as the “we” that is appealed to in the moment of transition does not yet exist. Rather, the “we” towards which all reconciliatory politics strives is essentially a high-risk wager. The necessary orientation towards a common world, which is never simply “out there”, but must be created through the productive collision of plural standpoints, is called “worldliness” in Arendt’s terminology. If this orientation wanes away, the common world collapses.

Appeals to restorative justice must then be denounced as implicit disavowals of politics: in order to eschew the hazard of rupture, they present reconciliation as a process beyond struggle and conflict.²⁷ In so doing, they postulate a community that ends up

²⁷ The foregrounding of struggle and conflict also sets the agonistic approach on a different track from deliberative models of reconciliation and transitional justice, which emphasize the importance of reasoned justifications for political claim-making. For a prominent defense of the deliberative view in the context of the South African TRC, see: Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), chap. 6: The Moral Foundations of Truth Commissions. For a thorough rebuttal, see: Sarah Maddison, “When Deliberation Remains Out of Reach: The Role of Agonistic Engagement in Divided Societies,” in *Democratic Deliberation in Deeply Divided Societies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 189–205.

being “wordless”, anchored in the intimacy of kindred spirits, yet lacking the plurality that typifies political action. Although it is easy to comprehend why one would desire, in a post-conflict setting, to gloss over and minimize the differences that had led to violent altercations, it is myopic to invoke the existence of a “we”, which merely needs to be restored, without also accounting for the agonistic relations that will necessarily persist in the common world to come.²⁸

The agonistic dimension of political reconciliation has received sustained attention from fellow theorists. To give just three recent examples: Mihaela Mihai has shown how negative emotions, such as resentment and indignation, can be appropriated for identifying aspects of reconciliatory politics where victims have not been properly acknowledged and engaged with.²⁹ In a similar vein, Danielle Celermajer discards the notion that apologies in the service of political reconciliation merely concede past failings in order for society to “move on”. Rather, as collective rituals, they are performative speech acts that go beyond the sincere declaration of misdeeds.³⁰ Finally, Lawrie Balfour demonstrates that the language of reparations can become an effective means

²⁸ Schaap, *Political Reconciliation*, 81–137. Especially Arendt’s thoughts on forgiveness, which Schaap discusses in depth, are relevant for our topic. Arendt argued that forgiveness is essential for dealing with the irreversible nature of the past. Human action, for Arendt, depends on the possibility “to be released from the consequences of what we have done” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.)

²⁹ Mihaela Mihai, *Negative Emotions and Transitional Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

³⁰ Danielle Celermajer, *The Sins of the Nation and the Ritual of Apologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

for social renewal. Interpreting W. E. B. Du Bois's writings, Balfour conclusively establishes how a reconciliatory politics based solely on equal citizenship strategically erases traces of the violent past.³¹

What these reconstructions of political reconciliation share, despite their obvious differences, is a sober vision of post-conflict society defying the ideal of restoration.³² Attentiveness to negative emotions, apologies and reparations thus demonstrates how agonistic relations can thrive in post-conflict situations without preparing the ground for further violence.

Estrangement as an Aesthetic and Political Category

My objective in this section is to home in on a specific aspect of agonistic reconciliation that has thus far received less attention in the extant debate: the mechanism by which world-disclosure is effectively accomplished. One way of achieving world-disclosure is, counterintuitively, through the experience of estrangement. The concept of estrangement has its origins in literary theory, dating back to the Russian formalist

³¹ Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W.E.B. Du Bois*, Transgressing Boundaries (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³² For yet another book that explores similar themes, see: Sonali Chakravarti, *Sing the Rage: Listening to Anger after Mass Violence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

Viktor Shklovsky, but with even deeper roots reaching into Hegel's and Marx's philosophy at least.³³ For the sake of concision, I will concentrate on the story commencing with Shklovsky's writings from the early 20th Century.³⁴ Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* (translated into English either as defamiliarization or estrangement) was first developed in an article from 1917 called "Art, as Device".³⁵ *Ostranenie* describes a specific technique by which things that we habitually consider well-known and common are presented from a new and surprising perspective.³⁶ Instead of focusing on the realistic depiction of a scene or character, the estranging technique makes visible the very process by which art works are created. Here is how Shklovsky summarizes this view:

³³ Carlo Ginzburg, "Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device," *Representations*, no. 56 (1996): 8–28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928705>.

³⁴ Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature: Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht*, Parallax (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). On formalism in literary theory see: Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pt. 1: Formalisms: Russian Formalism and New Criticism; Peter Steiner, *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

³⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," trans. Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today* 36, no. 3 (2015): 151–74, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-3160709>. For a recently published collection of Shklovsky's writings in English, see: Viktor Shklovsky, *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016). This book also contains a helpful introduction to Shklovsky's thinking, by Alexandra Berlina.

³⁵ Shklovsky, "Art, as Device."

³⁶ J. A. Cuddon, "Defamiliarization," ed. Matthew Birchwood et al., *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Malden/Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

And so this thing we call art exists in order to restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the “estrangement” of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is, in art, an end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is the means to live through the making of a thing; what has been made does not matter in art.³⁷

The application of this technique within literature is wide-spread. For instance, Tolstoy’s writings capture that which is normally perceived as familiar with a shocking naivety, “describing it as if seen for the first time, as if happening for the first time”³⁸. Miguel de Cervantes and Lawrence Sterne are other examples of authors who frequently employ the technique of *ostranenie*.³⁹ In this sense, estrangement is sparked by a stubborn refusal to take settled meanings and conventional understandings for granted.⁴⁰

Estrangement as an artistic device has had an astonishing career. Looking back at his own conceptual innovation 50 years earlier, Shklovsky noted with amazement how far the idea had travelled.⁴¹ Certainly the most influential way in which the notion of *ostranenie* has been later revised was through Berthold Brecht’s theory and practice of

³⁷ Shklovsky, “Art, as Device,” 162.

³⁸ Shklovsky, 163.

³⁹ Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose* (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991).

⁴⁰ Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, “The Subversive Potential of Leo Tolstoy’s ‘Defamiliarisation’: A Case Study in Drawing on the Imagination to Denounce Violence,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 2018; Liza Knapp, “The Development of Style and Theme in Tolstoy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, ed. Donna Tussing Orwin (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 161–75.

⁴¹ Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature*, 79.

epic theatre.⁴² What Brecht calls *Verfremdung* (translated into English as either estrangement, alienation or distancing) is closely related to Shklovsky's basic concept.⁴³ For Brecht, however, the desired effect of *Verfremdung* exceeds that of "making things strange": on stage, it unravels an intricate process whereby the audience is supposed to become fully conscious of the distance between its own idiosyncratic, ideologically imbricated standpoints and the scene on stage. Like Shklovsky, Brecht sought to lay bare the mechanisms through which art is being crafted, expecting that the theatre visitors would draw their own conclusions from what is being shown.

Importantly, Brecht alleged that epic theatre needed to avoid generating "the crudest form of empathy"⁴⁴ on the part of the audience. Politically and artistically, feeling empathy can be a treacherous reaction because it permits the spectators to assimilate the experiences conveyed on stage to their own life-worlds.⁴⁵ On Brecht's view, critical thinking can only occur once the viewers become aware of the artificiality of what is

⁴² Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), 179–205.

⁴³ Stanley Mitchell, "From Shklovsky to Brecht: Some Preliminary Remarks Towards a History of the Politicisation of Russian Formalism," *Screen* 15, no. 2 (1974): 74–81. Another important source of inspiration for Brecht was the Chinese theatre tradition. See: Bertolt Brecht, "On Chinese Acting," *The Tulane Drama Review* 6, no. 1 (1961): 130–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1125011>; Ronnie Bai, "Dances with Mei Lanfang: Brecht and the Alienation Effect," *Comparative Drama* 32, no. 3 (1998): 389–433, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.1998.0040>.

⁴⁴ Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," 195.

⁴⁵ This negative appraisal of empathy echoes Arendt's scathing view of compassion as solitary, unpolitical "co-suffering". Arendt conceived of compassion as an a-political emotion that is unable to sustain freedom and plurality. See: Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 81–85.

being staged. As Fredric Jameson observes with regard to Brecht's method, "the spectacle as a whole should try to demonstrate to the audience that we are all actors, and that acting is an inescapable dimension of social and everyday life"⁴⁶. Developing his theatrical vision over a long period of time and in collaboration with a stable group of actors – the famous *Berliner Ensemble* – allowed Brecht to explore various aspects of the *V-Effekt*.⁴⁷

In view of the subsequent discussion, it is important to note that estrangement on stage is not opposed to affects and passions per se. Rather, Brecht surmised that artistic interventions needed to permanently subvert the audience's tendency to look for catharsis.⁴⁸ For Brecht, political art must carefully navigate between the extremes of anodyne hyper-rationalism and full emotional immersion.⁴⁹ As Darko Suvin poignantly remarks, "Brecht's main orientation [...] is therefore a refusal of empathy as the be-all and end-all in favor of *precisely graded and argued sympathy*. Sympathy means, even etymologically, 'feeling with' (as opposed to empathy's 'feeling into')⁵⁰."

⁴⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London/New York: Verso, 2000), 25.

⁴⁷ David Barnett, *A History of the Berliner Ensemble*, Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴⁸ Brecht's rejection of catharsis is especially relevant for our engagement with agonistic reconciliation, because the TRC entailed the therapeutic promise of individual and collective healing through truth-telling. See: Claire Moon, "Narrating Political Reconciliation: Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa," *Social & Legal Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 257–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663906063582>.

⁴⁹ Anthony Squiers, *An Introduction to the Social and Political Philosophy of Bertolt Brecht: Revolution and Aesthetics* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2014), 55–80.

⁵⁰ "Emotion, Brecht, Empathy vs. Sympathy," *Brecht-Jahrbuch*, 2008, 64.

This point also matters for Arendt's thoughts on theatre as the "political art par excellence". Even though the *V-Effekt* was designed to undercut emotional identification, which Brecht associated with the Aristotelian tradition⁵¹, in practice the Greek tragedy seems to have served specific purposes that, in some respects, resembled that of estrangement.⁵² Geared towards the critical self-interrogation of the *polis*, tragedy was instrumental in sustaining democracy – through the cultivation of civic judgment. As Peter Euben's perceptively notes:

Interested in the interplay of passion and reason, tragedy not only sought a balance that enhanced both, but provided an example of such balance in its very form. Probing the shaping force of institutions and traditions, tragedy was itself a political institution and part of a tradition. Educating the judgment of the political community, it thereby nurtured an audience capable of appreciating what it was and did.⁵³

Before investigating the complex machinations of *Verfremdung* in a concrete drama, I need to further probe the linkages between aesthetics and politics. While it is relatively straightforward to grasp how Brecht conceived of these linkages – his theory and prac-

⁵¹ For a helpful reconstruction of the argument, see: Angela Curran, "Brecht's Criticisms of Aristotle's Aesthetics of Tragedy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59, no. 2 (February 1, 2001): 167–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0021-8529.00016>.

⁵² For general introductions see: Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Simon Goldhill, "Greek Drama and Political Theory," in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 60–88.

⁵³ J. Peter Euben, "Introduction," in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, ed. J. Peter Euben (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 28.

tice of stagecraft was, after all, highly didactical and openly oriented towards emancipation⁵⁴ – Shklovsky’s case requires a little more unpacking. For it is undoubtedly the case that *ostranenie* was primarily understood as a literary method, with restricted reach beyond the world of novels, at least during the initial phase of the debate. What is more, the formalist movement came from the 1920s onwards under mounting Soviet pressure for its bourgeois “cosmopolitanism”, leading to the dissolution of all literary organizations in 1932.⁵⁵ As we have remarked above, the refusal to simply accept things as they appear to be underpins estrangement as an artistic technique, both in Tolstoy and in Shklovsky. In what ways, then, does this attitude also serve as a primer for social critique?

Svetlana Boym’s answer to this question is instructive, especially given the paper’s main concern with reconciliation. Boym detects a profound, yet largely unappreciated, resonance between Shklovsky’s reflections on estrangement and Hannah Arendt’s notion of world-disclosure. Her main claim entails that “*ostranenie* was never an estrangement from the world, but estrangement for the sake of the world’s renewal”⁵⁶. It would be a misunderstanding to conceive of estrangement solely in terms

⁵⁴ Silvija Jestrovic, *Theatre of Estrangement: Theory, Practice, Ideology*, German and European Studies (Toronto/Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2006), chap. 3: Epic Theatre in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.

⁵⁵ Evgeny Dobrenko, “Literary Criticism and the Transformations of the Literary Field during the Cultural Revolution, 1928–1932,” in *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Galin Tihanov and Evgeny Dobrenko (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 43–63.

⁵⁶ Svetlana Boym, “Poetics and Politics of Estrangement: Victor Shklovsky and Hannah Arendt,” *Poetics Today* 26, no. 4 (2005): 599, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-26-4-581>.

of an imaginative turn away from the world. This type of estrangement goes hand in hand with a waning orientation towards the common world, which inevitably triggers apathy, distrust and anxiety amongst citizens.

Even though an influential tradition envisages estrangement along these lines, arising notably from the celebration of Stoic withdrawal and Romantic introspection, an alternative kind of reasoning can be unearthed as well. Surprisingly, Hannah Arendt's account of world-disclosure allows us to take a step towards positively valorizing estrangement. On Boym's reading, estrangement *for*, rather than *from*, the world is predicated on a passionate commitment to worldly affairs that counteracts the alienating effects of withdrawal and introspection. This is where the nexus between Arendt and Shklovsky emerges most vividly:

[E]strangement for the world is an acknowledgment of the integral human plurality that we must recognize within us and within others. This is a way of seeing the world anew, a possibility of a new beginning that is fundamental for aesthetic experience, critical judgment, and political action.⁵⁷

We can now sense how the aesthetic dimension of estrangement bears on the political realm. If maintaining freedom hangs on the construction of a common world in which differences are both affirmed, negotiated and altered, then estrangement can turn into a dynamic stimulus for defending freedom. Refusing to take settled meanings and conventional understandings for granted ensures that the members of the public sphere remain vigilant about any drive towards anti-pluralistic closure. Arendt called

⁵⁷ Boym, 602.

this peculiar ability “thinking without a banister”⁵⁸: a mode of judgment that would not have to rely on the assurances of traditional belief systems.

In sum, this section has argued that overcoming estrangement is not a precondition for attaining an ethic of worldliness. On the contrary, making things strange and seeing the world anew can serve as effective bulwarks against the decline of the common world. Distance, of the right kind, is pivotal for grappling with the other in an agonistic fashion. Estrangement may thus support, rather than undermine, collective renewal. As Boym astutely writes, the totalitarian erasure of the public sphere engendered a “combination of extreme scientism and mysticism or conspiratorial thinking”⁵⁹. In other words, estrangement turns suspicious at precisely that moment in time when freedom is obliterated.⁶⁰

This remark about the co-implication of estrangement and world-disclosure, found in both Arendt and Shklovsky, is pertinent for the discussion around political reconciliation. Recall how authors who cast doubt on the restorative justice paradigm extol the positive features of continuous contestation in post-conflict settings. Albeit considered perilous, appeals to negative emotions, apologies and reparations manage to disrupt the standard narrative of closure promoted by those who desire to rebuild a broken

⁵⁸ Hannah Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 336–37.

⁵⁹ Boym, “Poetics and Politics of Estrangement,” 603.

⁶⁰ With a view to the next section, it is worthwhile noting that, in a short piece, Boym also applies her reading of estrangement to William Kentridge’s oeuvre, focusing on an installation from 2008. See: Svetlana Boym, “Defamiliarized Human,” in *The Off-Modern* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 107–12.

polity in the image of an organic unity. The peculiar variant of world-disclosing estrangement explored in this section can assist us in shattering that image, opening up a path for political reconciliation in an agonistic key.

The World Disclosed by *Ubu and the Truth Commission*

Since constructing a common world is contingent on the ability to see the world anew, it becomes imperative to reflect on the cultivation of the most fruitful kind of estrangement, both as an artistic device and as a political technique. This section examines in detail how this goal may be approached – on stage and in the auditorium. My guiding intuition here is that *Ubu and the Truth Commission* exhibits exactly those qualities that Boym ascribes to estrangement enabling world-disclosure. This is so because the play's depiction of perpetrators and victims simultaneously disallows audience identification and prompts affective engagement: in conjunction, these mechanisms compel the viewers to see themselves and others in a new light.

Ubu and the Truth Commission is a theatre piece penned by Jane Taylor and directed by William Kentridge. Kentridge is today one of South Africa's most successful and revered artists, whose oeuvre over the past 30 years spans drawings, animations, films and dramaturgy.⁶¹ Taylor, a writer and academic, has collaborated extensively with South Africa's famous *Handspring Puppet Company*.⁶² The play's development has been

⁶¹ William Kentridge, *William Kentridge: Fortuna*, ed. Lilian Tone (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013).

⁶² Later on, the *Handspring Puppet Company* would produce the global smash hit *War Horse*. See: Adrian Kohler, Basil Jones, and Tommy Luther, "Handspring Puppet Company," *The Journal of Modern Craft* 2, no. 3 (November 1, 2009): 345–54, <https://doi.org/10.2752/174967809X12556950209069>. Kentridge also

described as a “complex weave of happenstance and conscious decision-making”⁶³. It premiered at Johannesburg’s Market Theatre, whose mission, since 1976, has been to “raise the awareness of its mainly white audiences about the oppression of apartheid and their own social, political, and economic privileges”⁶⁴.

Puppets figure prominently throughout the play, performing the roles of both Apartheid’s perpetrators and victims. The use of puppetry is not the only unconventional element. At various moments, the performance on stage is interrupted by animated films and documentary footage, which either accompany the scene or veer into nightmarish, chaotic sequences of extreme violence.⁶⁵

Ubu and the Truth Commission’s story in five acts can be conveyed relatively quickly. Pa and Ma Ubu live together, but Ma is suspicious of her husband’s day-job. Pa Ubu

worked with them for the Georg Büchner adaptation *Woyzeck in the Highveld* (1992) and for *Faustus in Africa* (1995).

⁶³ Lesley Marx, “Slouching towards Bethlehem: Ubu and the Truth Commission,” *African Studies* 57, no. 2 (December 1, 1998): 213, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020189808707896>.

⁶⁴ Hilary Burns, “The Market Theatre of Johannesburg in the New South Africa,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (2002): 359, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X02000477>.

⁶⁵ The films, separately assembled in Kentridge’s *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997), are produced by using a stop-action camera to repeatedly photograph drawings made with charcoal and pastel. See: Nico Israel, *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art*, Modernist Latitudes (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 190–97; Beschara Sharlene Karam, “Landscapes of the Unconscious Mind: A Dialectic of Self and Memory on a Post-Colonial, South African Landscape in the Hand-Animated, Charcoal-Medium Films of William Kentridge” (University of South Africa, 2011), <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/9999>.

is in fact employed by the South African police, as the head of a death squad. One of his assistants – Niles, a crocodile-puppet – informs him that a truth commission is being set up to investigate the crimes under Apartheid:

PA UBU: Oh, Niles, such a vision I had. I saw the Great Truth approaching, a rope in its hand. It demanded I speak of the truth of our land.

NILES: Well, as I understand things, you have a choice. You can take your chances, keep silent, and wait to see if the law comes after you. But once they have unmasked you, you'll have to face the music. My advice would be to pre-empt it all. I hear there is to be a Commission to determine Truths, Distortions and Proportions.

PA UBU: I've heard of Truths and of Distortions, but what are these Proportions you talk about?

NILES: An inquiry is to be conducted by great and blameless men who measure what is done, and why, and how.⁶⁶

Pa Ubu decides to ignore Niles's admonition and destroys evidence of his criminal misdeeds by feeding papers into the crocodile's mouth. His further entourage includes Brutus, a dog-puppet with three heads, like Cerberus, whom we have already encountered in the essay's introduction. Apart from this cast, the other puppets in the play recount the verbatim testimonies of Apartheid's victims, which are transcribed from the TRC's proceedings. These witness accounts are rendered in Xhosa, and then translated into English by a second puppet handler. The victim-puppets often share the stage with Pa and Ma Ubu when they go about their everyday activities.

Pa Ubu struggles with the requirement to speak in front of the truth commission, but at one point we observe the scene with which this paper began – Brutus's three heads are sentenced differently during their trial. Sarcastically mimicking the TRC's programmatic tendency to issue amnesties for those holding positions of power, while

⁶⁶ Taylor, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, 17.

severely punishing those who had exerted excess violence, the judge's verdict also pinpoints the TRC's failure to address Apartheid's structural violence.⁶⁷ Following inquisitions by the truth commission, the play ends rather abruptly, with Pa and Ma sailing off into the sea after being acquitted.

As anybody who has seen the piece either live or on video will probably confirm, the often incoherent and dream-like plot itself is perhaps less intriguing than the multi-media means by which the story is told. Interpreting *Ubu and the Truth Commission* therefore depends on paying close attention to its formal aspects as well as to its narrative content. I will in the following concentrate on four key motifs: its intertextual web of influences; the creative use of puppetry; the transformative pronouncement of testimony; and the play's acknowledgement of the audience's ambiguous reaction to the suffering represented on stage. Together, these themes validate the intuition that estrangement is fundamental to our understanding of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*' power.

Let us start with an obvious remark about the play's historical genesis. The protagonist, Pa Ubu, is fashioned after the main character in Alfred Jarry's 1896 piece *Ubu Roi*, which was an important launch board for the surrealist movement, the theatre of the

⁶⁷ Mahmood Mamdani, "Amnesty or Impunity? A Preliminary Critique of the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC)," *Diacritics* 32, no. 3/4 (2002): 33–59; Clint van der Walt, Vijé Franchi, and Garth Stevens, "The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission: 'Race', Historical Compromise and Transitional Democracy," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 27, no. 2 (2003): 251–67, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767\(02\)00089-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(02)00089-5).

absurd and for aesthetic modernism in the 20th Century more generally.⁶⁸ Jarry's Ubu is a vulgar creature who defies the conventions of bourgeois serenity and moral dictates. His infantile outlook on the world, garnished by grotesque expletives and scatological asides, is taken up in Taylor's and Kentridge's play. Taylor and Kentridge were fascinated by the idea of transposing this eccentric and disturbing figure into the milieu of today's South Africa. In locating Pa Ubu in a post-conflict setting, an adjustment was made, however:

Our purpose, in this play, was to take the Ubu-character out of the burlesque context, and place him within a domain in which actions do have consequences. The archaic and artificial language which Ubu uses, with its rhymes, its puns, its bombast and its profanities, is set against the detailed and careful descriptions of the witness accounts which have been, in large part, transcribed from the TRC hearings.⁶⁹

While Pa Ubu thus appears unmoved by how his deeds play out in the real world, the South African context inevitably modifies the protagonist's self-understanding. The contrast between Pa's vulgar excesses, frequently interspersed by exculpatory lines from Apartheid killers like Dirk Coetzee, and the verbatim testimonies pronounced by the victim-puppets is especially stark. It signals the radical break that the transition

⁶⁸ Manuel L. Grossman, "Alfred Jarry and the Theatre of the Absurd," *Educational Theatre Journal* 19, no. 4 (1967): 473-77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3205027>; Renée Riese Hubert, "Ubu Roi and the Surrealist Livre de Peintre," *Word & Image* 3, no. 4 (1987): 259-78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.1987.10435589>; Olga Taxidou, *Modernism and Performance: Jarry to Brecht* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁶⁹ Jane Taylor, "Writer's Note," in *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, by Jane Taylor (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1998), iv.

period needed to negotiate: those who trusted their criminal deeds would remain beyond accountability, were summoned by the TRC to overtly explain how their motivations led to concrete atrocities.

The play hence explores what happens when this enforced injection of conscience is curtailed by the consistent failure of perpetrators to see themselves as sharing a common world with their victims. Just like the actual torturers, Pa Ubu and his accomplices are radically lacking in sympathy for their social environment. This goes so far that we never witness any violence on stage, just its aftermath: Pa Ubu's involvement in the Apartheid death squad is only retrospectively made visible, when he quickly destroys evidence or reeks of the blood spilt in the torture chamber.⁷⁰

Secondly, let us inquire into the play's distinctive use of puppetry. Recall that only Ma and Pa Ubu are played by human actors, whereas the rest of the cast are puppets. Jane Taylor elucidates this dramaturgic decision in the following way:

The puppet draws attention to its own artifice, and we as audience willingly submit ourselves to the ambiguous processes that at once deny and assert the reality of what we watch. They thus very poignantly and compellingly capture complex relations of testimony, translation and documentation apparent in the processes of the Commission itself.⁷¹

What makes the use of puppetry especially fascinating is that the puppeteers are fully observable when they voice the victim accounts; they also serve as each other's translators when reciting testimonies in Xhosa. As a consequence, the viewers are automatically drawn to the puppet handler's face to follow the translation. At one point in the

⁷⁰ Shane Graham, "The Truth Commission and Postapartheid Literature in South Africa," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 1 (March 24, 2003): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ral.2003.0006>.

⁷¹ Taylor, "Writer's Note," vii.

play, the puppeteers even take over as impromptu actors: one victim-puppet's testimony is interrupted when the handler lets go of the puppet and manipulates it to display where on the victim's head violence was inflicted. In an astonishing exchange, reminiscent of the TRC's inclusion of "comforters" to sooth witnesses in especially harrowing moments, the other puppeteer listens attentively and offers solace to the interim narrator.⁷²

This stepping out of the handler's role provides but one illustration of how the play permanently ruptures expectations on the part of the audience. Watching Ma and Pa Ubu talk to life-sized, stylized puppets, in a multimedia *Gesamtkunstwerk* that fuses together operatic songs and animated films, makes it impossible to directly empathize and identify with what is being shown on stage.⁷³ The use of puppets, impersonating both perpetrators and victims, is crucial for attaining this effect. As Olga Taxidou observes concerning the avant-garde's fascination with marionettes more generally, "the

⁷² Yvette Coetzee, "Visibly Invisible: How Shifting the Conventions of the Traditionally Invisible Puppeteer Allows for More Dimensions in Both the Puppeteer-Puppet Relationship and the Creation of Theatrical Meaning in Ubu & the Truth Commission," *South African Theatre Journal* 12, no. 1-2 (January 1998): 45-46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.1998.9687664>.

⁷³ Peter Ukpokodu, "Puppets as Witnesses and Perpetrators in Ubu and the Truth Commission," in *A Companion to Modern African Art*, ed. Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà (Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 408-25.

response it [the puppet] will elicit from its audience will not necessarily be one of empathy and identification; it might be awe and wonder harping back to the puppets' religious roots or it might be one of distance and estrangement"⁷⁴.

This point about awe and wonder leads to the third aspect I wish to underscore: how the play deals with the testimonies taken from the TRC's records. Taylor and Kentridge were acutely mindful of the profound ethical dilemmas that any cultural re-enactment of victim accounts faced:

What is our responsibility to the people whose stories we are using as raw fodder for the play? There seemed to be an awkwardness in getting an actor play the witnesses - the audience being caught halfway between having to believe in the actor for the sake of the story, and also not believe in the actor for the sake of the actual witness who existed out there but was not the actor. Using a puppet made this production palpable. There is no attempt to make the audience think the wooden puppet or its manipulator is the actual witness. The puppet becomes the medium through which the testimony can be heard.⁷⁵

Ubu and the Truth Commission thus starts with the awareness that drawing on the verbatim testimonies of Apartheid victims entails a problematic act of appropriation that decontextualizes traumatic suffering for the sake of stagecraft. Puppetry simultaneously renders this artistic appropriation visible and uncovers a route towards responsibly expressing first-person narratives: precisely because it does not have a body of its own, the puppet manages to enunciate the testimony without distorting its actual content. A portrayal of the victims' experiences by human performers would, on the other hand, be inevitably tarnished by the actors' physical presence.

⁷⁴ Olga Taxidou, "Actor or Puppet: The Body in the Theatres of the Avant-Garde," in *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2005), 228–29.

⁷⁵ William Kentridge, "Director's Note: The Crocodile's Mouth," in *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, by Jane Taylor (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1998), xi.

To better comprehend the play's complexity, we need to keep in mind that testimony in transitional justice projects consists not only of truth-telling akin to a public confession, but also entails a "performative speech act told in a context where its truth-claim can produce a conscious, positive effect"⁷⁶. As observed above, the TRC's ambitious goal was to merge the testimonials' truth-telling with their therapeutic function, such that both the victims themselves and the wider public of bystanders could envisage reconciliation as the culmination of the transition period. Ideally, a single narrative of admitted wrong-doing and generous forgiveness was supposed to materialize from this process of national healing.

Evidently, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* is not subject to the same logic of telling an over-arching, all-encompassing story. On the contrary, the purpose of artistic engagements with transitional justice "has been the problematizing of different perspectives and memories."⁷⁷ Pronouncing the actual victim statements on a theatre stage dislocates their performative function such that the audience member is suddenly cast in

⁷⁶ Stephanie Marlin-Curiel, "A Little Too Close to the Truth: Anxieties of Testimony and Confession in 'Ubu and the Truth Commission' and 'The Story I Am About to Tell,'" *South African Theatre Journal* 15, no. 1 (January 2001): 80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2001.9687724>. For a discussion of the role of testimony from an agonistic perspective, see: Sonali Chakravarti, "Agonism and the Power of Victim Testimony," in *Theorizing Post-Conflict Reconciliation: Agonism, Restitution and Repair*, ed. Alexander Keller Hirsch (Milton Park/New York: Routledge, 2012), 11–26.

⁷⁷ Yvette Hutchison, "Truth or Bust: Consensualising a Historic Narrative or Provoking through Theatre. The Place of the Personal Narrative in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 15, no. 3 (2005): 361, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10267160500217798>.

the “role of active listener, rather than passive spectator”⁷⁸. Since the viewers know about the truth-content of the victim-puppets’ reports, treating the play merely as a series of absurd events is not a meaningful option. More likely, the viewers are thrown into the uncomfortable position of having to issue a judgement on the perpetrators’ and bystanders’ actions. Recovering this ability to think “without a banister” is one of the faculties that scholars of transitional justice have identified as pivotal for coming to terms with a past of violence.⁷⁹

The prompting of active involvement through the “second-order” performativity of testimonials brings me to my final point, concerning the way in which ambiguity pervades the play. Jane Taylor thematizes this issue succinctly:

There is [...] a sense of ambiguity produced by the play. This is not an ambiguity about the experiences of loss and pain suffered; rather, it is an ambiguity about how we respond to such suffering. Our own reactions are questioned, because, after all, what is it in us that makes us seek out the stories of another’s grief.⁸⁰

Taylor’s argument resonates with Kentridge’s assertion, cited in the essay’s epigraph, that embracing “ambiguity and contradiction is not to say that one then stops recognizing and condemning things as evil”⁸¹. Precisely because political art grapples with evil, it must constantly problematize its own modes of production and reception. For

⁷⁸ Marlin-Curiel, “A Little Too Close to the Truth,” 98.

⁷⁹ Bronwyn Leebaw, *Judging State-Sponsored Violence, Imagining Political Change* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁸⁰ Taylor, “Writer’s Note,” v.

⁸¹ Christov-Bakargiev and Kentridge, “Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in Conversation with William Kentridge (1999),” 21.

the portrayal of severe trauma on stage, screen or paper always carries the risk of feeding voyeurism.⁸² As the puppeteers, Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, admit, “badly handled, such stories could easily become a kind of horror pornography”⁸³. *Ubu and the Truth Commission* faces this challenge by vigorously undercutting appeals to empathy. The fact that puppets channel, rather than embody, victim accounts, demonstrates how precarious this process is. At its center resides the problem of audience identification when confronted with factual testimonies of violations. Through the back-and-forth between puppeteers and victim-puppets, the audience members are impelled to empathize with the suffering on stage, without ever managing to establish an emotional connection with the testimonies. Jill Bennett stresses this constitutive contradiction when she points out that

Ubu [...] draws us into a spectacle in which emotions are abundant and contagious; simultaneously faked and deeply felt. [...] In this domain, art no longer claims to take us into the place of a witness but constitutes this space of encounter as one in which empathy is, in part, the product of being touched by another and, in part, an effect of *seeing oneself feeling*, catching oneself in the act of acting.⁸⁴

To sum up, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* mobilizes a variety of estrangement devices to interrogate the inter-actions of perpetrators and victims in the aftermath of violence. The play deals with the difficulty of using verbatim witness accounts as “raw fodder”

⁸² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London/New York: Verso, 2009).

⁸³ Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, “Puppeteers’ Note,” in *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, by Jane Taylor (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1998), xvi–xvii.

⁸⁴ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 123.

by rendering the artificiality of the stagecraft palpable, through an array of animated clips, grotesque imagery and documentary footage. An upshot of this method is that the audience's impulsive instinct to identify with the victims is repeatedly frustrated, with the effect that critical thinking and transformative self-reflection can hopefully gain traction.

Paradoxically, it is from within the chasm between the viewers and the actors/puppets/puppet handlers that a space for understanding unfolds; feeling for the victims alone, perhaps induced exclusively through documentary footage taken from the TRC, would not achieve the same world-disclosing outcome, for it would remain based on the dubious logic of immersive identification. In the absence of intersecting layers of estrangement, the members of the audience might be tempted to imagine themselves in the victims' positions, contemplating what it is like to be tortured and maimed – an illusion that seems both phenomenologically questionable and politically dangerous, due to the victim's reduction to a mere screen for assimilating suffering to one's own lifeworld.

Given the ever-present temptation of assimilation, we must remain emotionally at distance from what is being represented to save ourselves from the facile self-deception of grasping the horror of human suffering. The play thus estranges us from ourselves when we watch how we react, emotionally and intellectually, to the stagecraft; through this process of reflection and self-inspection a new beginning can be envisioned. Returning to the distinction made earlier, we can therefore conclude that *Ubu and the Truth Commission* is such a potent play precisely because it estranges the audience *for*, rather than *from*, the world.

Resisting Closure

In the final section, I shall delineate some general conclusions that follow from my reading of *Ubu and The Truth Commission* as a paradigmatic case of world-disclosure through estrangement. Recall that defenders of agonistic reconciliation repudiate the image of restorative justice as the apex of transitional justice projects. Since many transitional justice projects, like the TRC, operate on the idealizing assumption that reconciliation crowns the restoration of society to its organic unity, part of what needs to be done is to critically probe the extent to which this assumption stands on shaky foundations. Schaap's insistence that political reconciliation needs to work through persistent conflicts, rather than simply renounce them, points in this direction.

When a settlement is presented as firmly re-constituting a moral community, it might be necessary to try to re-politicize it, even at the risk of deep differences between former enemies surfacing once again. By re-politicization I mean a continuous declaration of the need for a common world in which agonistic relations are positively upheld, rather than obfuscated. Counteracting the displacement of politics in the aftermath of violence is hence a major undertaking for the defenders of the agonistic view of reconciliation. Attending to negative emotions, apologies and reparations, to reiterate the three exemplary modes of agonistic reconciliation rehearsed above, triggers re-politicization in this sense.

Yannis Stavrakakis avers that artists attuned to political issues can back such projects of re-politicization, by dismantling the "fetishization and demonization of the enemy

figure as an alien intruder destabilizing our supposed harmony.”⁸⁵ In a post-conflict setting, the fraught relationships between perpetrators, bystanders and victims need to be re-articulated in such a way that a peaceful future can be collectively imagined. As I hope to have demonstrated in this paper, we require proper estrangement devices to facilitate the re-politicizing of those settlements that suppress and efface agonistic relations. If my argument is accurate, then political art is central to the prospects of agonistic reconciliation.

The discussion of *Ubu and the Truth Commission* has revealed how estrangement devices may enable us to resist depoliticization. Contesting the official story is based on putting both perpetrator stories and victim accounts into a contrasting setting. Depicting the leader of an Apartheid death squad as a thoughtless and farcical brute, who is completely incapable of connecting his own deeds to their horrible consequences, allows the viewers to again look into the statements made in front of the TRC and to “critique the state supported truth”⁸⁶.

In opposition to the chronicling of perpetrator stories, the peculiar staging of victim accounts never disputes their truth claims. Only puppets, which do not have human bodies, can recite these scripts in such a way that their authenticity is simultaneously

⁸⁵ Yannis Stavrakakis, “Challenges of Re-Politicisation,” *Third Text* 26, no. 5 (September 1, 2012): 565, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2012.712771>.

⁸⁶ Yvette Hutchison, “Post-1990s Verbatim Theatre in South Africa: Exploring an African Concept of ‘Truth,’” in *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, ed. Carol Martin (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 66.

preserved and re-configured for theatrical consumption. This, in turn, makes it imperative for the members of the audience to become “active listeners”, obliging them to judge what is being negotiated on stage. Unmediated empathy would likely obstruct critical reflection and self-inspection; the emotional identification with the victims would nourish a fantasy of universal connectedness that cannot be politically validated. Just the right kind of distance – what Boym calls estrangement *for*, rather than *from* the world – generates opportunities for genuine understanding.

Art works that deploy estrangement devices are highly demanding of the audience. As should be evident from my description, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* is not exactly light, easily accessible entertainment. What makes these art works difficult is their propensity to deliberately create unease and discomfort on the part of the viewers. Since they rely on estrangement, rather than catharsis, plays like *Ubu and the Truth Commission* take us beyond ourselves; they shake the comfortable position of our acquired knowledge and question that which seems most fixed and stable to us.

Interestingly, estrangement *for*, rather than *from*, the world can touch audiences in unexpected ways. Although the story of *Ubu and the Truth Commission* has nothing to do with Romania, where the transitional period after the fall of the communist regime looked very different from South Africa’s, Kentridge remembers the following encounter:

After a performance, a woman came up to us, obviously moved by what she had seen. She said she was from Romania. We expressed surprise that the play had been accessible to her as it was so local in its content. “That’s it,” she said. “It is so local. So local. This play is written about Romania.”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Kentridge, “Director’s Note: The Crocodile’s Mouth,” xv.

A critic could object that the reception of the play, and of estrangement more generally, will vary considerably, depending on who sits in the auditorium and who acts on stage: certain groups, such as beneficiaries, for example, might be wooed to change their perspective on the reassuring truths about perpetrators, avowed by the TRC. But victims and survivors might feel very differently about a fictional narrative that appropriates their experiences in a defamiliarizing and satirizing manner. Recall, for instance, that Pa Ubu is throughout portrayed as a silly figure, whose pronouncements simultaneously provoke revulsion and ridicule. Victims and survivors will perhaps perceive the use of estrangement devices as a humiliating disparagement of their suffering.

This rejoinder cuts to the core of my argument. In response, a caveat on my proposal seems apposite. While this essay has not attempted to scrutinize the real-world impact of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, it certainly appears true that estrangement will not always deliver the most appropriate mechanism for achieving world-disclosure. To clarify, my argument has not been that estrangement offers a universally applicable formula to address the thorny problem of coming to terms with historical violence. Rather, what the play's interpretation brings to light is that, in certain moments, estrangement devices are indispensable to perturb naïve, one-dimensional records of the past and to rekindle societal conversations about transitional justice. By undoing settled meanings and conventional understandings, political art – when concerned with ambiguity and contradiction – creates distance and renews the spectators' orientation towards a common world.

In response to the objection, I hence contend that my vindication of a particular form of estrangement leaves sufficient space for alternative kinds of re-enactment that encourage other variants of “democratic political education”. Once again, the South African context provides an illustration of this proposal. While *Ubu and the Truth Commission* will arguably be most impactful on those viewers who display a simplistic grasp of the involvement of both perpetrators and bystanders in authoritarian societies, other types of theatre might speak to different groups, directly involving victims and showing solidarity with those still agonizing.⁸⁸ For example, the Khulumani Support Group dramatized the transitional process in a unique fashion, through their play *The Story I Am about to Tell*, performed by three survivors who had earlier testified before the TRC. The play is as much about survivors’ awareness-raising and self-empowerment, as it forcefully articulates one of Khulumani Support Group’s core demands: fundamental redress for the wrongs of Apartheid.⁸⁹ As Stephanie Marlin-Curiel writes:

By traveling to far-reaching townships and rural areas, *The Story I am About to Tell* let other people suffering in silence know that they were not alone, while also offering a model of how to survive. While allegedly a play about encouraging people to go to the TRC, it also embodied a critique of the TRC by performing outside the TRC’s institutional framework. For the Khulumani members who elected to participate in *The Story*, this exercise in repetition successfully reversed any perceptions of their victimhood. Repeating their stories in

⁸⁸ See: Stephanie Marlin-Curiel, “The Long Road to Healing: From the TRC to TfD,” *Theatre Research International* 27, no. 03 (October 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883302000342>.

⁸⁹ Aletta J. Norval, “‘No Reconciliation without Redress’: Articulating Political Demands in Post-Transitional South Africa,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 6, no. 4 (2009): 311–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405900903181176>.

public meant taking an active role in their own healing and helping to heal others.⁹⁰

Despite its advancing in the opposite direction from *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, the Khulumani Support Group, too, rejects crude didacticism. The lessons to draw from cultural re-enactments are, hence, never straightforward.

As the juxtaposition between these opposing types of theatre-making corroborates, the power of the “political art par excellence” – theatre – is today more fragmented and diffuse than in Arendt’s original example, Ancient Greece, where drama’s intended aim was the instruction of an audience that, in principle, extended to the entire *polis*.⁹¹ But this fragmentation and diffusion does not diminish the great potential that theatre still harbors: to make some of us see things differently.

Undoubtedly, this is a risky and uncertain endeavor, which many would want to eschew under all circumstances. After all, inspirational stories of national healing are much more soothing than the relentless probing of ambiguities and contradictions. Yet, avoidance comes at a high cost, as Arendt has taught us: apathy, distrust and anxiety reign supreme in a “worldless” polity where the essential pluralism of human relations has been abolished. This is why asserting the agonistic character of politics in general, and of reconciliation in particular, is ultimately inevitable. Art can help us in approximating this goal, by keeping optimism in check and nihilism at bay (to paraphrase Kentridge once again).

⁹⁰ Marlin-Curiel, “A Little Too Close to the Truth,” 94.

⁹¹ Simon Goldhill, “The Audience of Athenian Tragedy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 54–68.